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Chicago lawyer's 'clubhouse' helps brain-injured veterans

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Chicago lawyer Antonio M. Romanucci's first exposure to traumatic brain injuries came when his best friend died from such an injury as a teenager.

In 1976, Fran Fanelli, a football player at Walther High School in Melrose Park, died about two weeks after suffering a concussion during football practice, Romanucci said Tuesday.

Romanucci and members of his law firm, Romanucci & Blandin LLC in Chicago, concentrate on representing victims with traumatic brain injuries.

"Once I went to law school and became an injury attorney, I naturally gravitated toward clients with traumatic brain injuries," he said.

Romanucci helped found the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse, which is now on Chicago's near West Side. He served as the clubhouse board's president for seven years.

Nearly two weeks ago, Romanucci & Blandin hosted a fundraising event to benefit a veterans internship program at the clubhouse. About \$8,000 was raised at the event, Romanucci said.

He came up with the idea for the fundraiser due to the increasing number of veterans returning from Iraq with mild traumatic brain injuries or post-concussive syndrome.

"We need people to step up and start supporting the veterans who fought for our freedom and keep our country safe," Romanucci said.

There are four veterans, two paid and two unpaid, who work at the

clubhouse as interns. One of those veterans, Ryan Krantz, was treated at Hines V.A. Hospital in Chicago for a traumatic brain injury he suffered in Iraq.

Krantz now works three days a week at the clubhouse handling a variety of office tasks.

"I thought I would never be able to get back into the community," he said in a news release. "I thought I would be damaged for good, but the clubhouse showed me I can heal from my injury with this great veteran internship program."

The adopt-a-veteran program began about four months, Romanucci said. It costs about \$6,000 annually to fund a veteran intern.

The clubhouse can accommodate up to a dozen veterans for treatment throughout a week, Romanucci said.

The clubhouse was incorporated in 1999 and after a two-year fundraising effort opened its first facility in Park Ridge during 2001, Romanucci said.

The clubhouse's other co-founder is Deborah Giesler, who also serves as executive director.

She was a speech therapist at a suburban hospital who saw a gap in treatment for people with traumatic brain injuries following their release from acute care, Romanucci said.

"The clubhouse is a facility that provides a day-care center for these people," Romanucci said. "We teach them those living skills they need to be independent."

For more information, call the clubhouse at (312) 932-1120 or go to the Web site, www.braininjuryclubhouse.org.